

Examining Illinois School Administrators' Perceptions of a Teacher 3 Circles Grant Program

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Introduction

Current data from the United States Department of Education shows there are teacher shortages in at least one content area in 47 states, four U.S. Territories, and the District of Columbia (United States Department of Education, 2020). The American Association for Employment in Education has reported there is an overall shortage of educators in the United States (AAEE, 2018). The National Agricultural Education Supply & Demand Study from 2019 shows that 26.4% of the hired agriculture teachers were not traditionally certified to teach agriculture. Schools experiencing a shortage of teachers, especially a shortage of well-prepared, experienced, and effective teachers, have lower levels of student achievement and less positive student outcomes overall (Castro, 2018).

Tye and O'Brien (2002) stated that teacher pay was the number one reason teachers in their study were considering leaving teaching. Prospective agricultural education students and graduates of agricultural education programs listed salary as one of their top factors in deciding on other careers (Igo et al., 2019; Myers et al. 2004). In previous research, agriculture teachers have been vocal about how extended contracts affect themselves. In a 2013 study, agriculture teachers reported that teacher satisfaction was related to the extra compensation from extended contracts (Tippens et al. 2013) and Warnick et al. (2010) reported adequate compensation was a significant factor for agriculture teachers choosing to remain in the profession.

In 2017, to help alleviate the shortage of qualified agriculture teachers in Illinois, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) created a committee to investigate the problem (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.). Their proposal was for a grant which supplements agricultural teachers' salaries beyond the required school day. While a number of districts employ this grant to recruit and retain teachers, 40% of Illinois agriculture teachers still have an 11-month contract or lower with 12% receiving only a nine-month contract (Illinois Annual Ag Ed Report, 2020). The objective of this study was to examine Illinois school administrators' attitudes towards the teacher 3 Circles Grant program. The need for our study was directed by the AAEE National Research Agenda, Research Priority 3: Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce that Addresses the Challenges of the 21st Century (Roberts et al., 2016).

Conceptual Framework

For the conceptual framework for our study, we adapted Solomonson et al's (2018) Compensation Construct from their Agriculture Teacher Retention or Attrition model. This model proposes the compensation a teacher receives (salary, benefits, and extended contract and/or stipend) can contribute to the teacher's decision to stay in or leave the teaching profession. Our model was based in part on previous Human Capital Theory (Grissmer & Kirby, 1987) and teacher retention and attrition research (Tippens et al., 2013).

Methodology

Our descriptive study was planned to determine administrators' perceptions and attitudes of the 3 Circles Grant program. Using the online survey design platform SurveyMonkey, our team developed our instrument consisting of two sections. The first section examined participants' opinions and thoughts pertaining to the 3 Circles Grant. The second section dealt

with personal and professional demographics. Before distributing the instrument, we had a panel of experts review the instrument for validity and we were granted IRB approval.

Our research team used a census study design to send the electronic survey to all current administrators of SBAE programs in Illinois. Data was collected over an eight-week period during summer, 2021 with multiple reminders to our population. We yielded a response rate of 28.8% ($n = 96$). Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS®) program version 26.0.

Findings

Overall, of the administrators at schools receiving the grant, 74.2% ($f = 46$) indicated that they *agree* to *strongly agree* that the 3 Circles Grant is a major factor in recruiting agriculture teacher applicants, while 80.9% ($f = 51$) responded that it is also a major factor in retaining their current agriculture teacher. Additionally, over 80% ($f = 52$; 82.6%) of those same administrators feel that the grant program has helped to increase participation in their agricultural education program. For school administrators in districts not participating in the 3 Circles Grant, over half ($f = 14$; 58.3%) believe that the grant would be a major factor in recruiting agriculture teacher applicants as well as helping increase participation in their agricultural education programs.

We also asked the school administrators about their connection to agriculture to determine if a relationship existed between their previous agricultural experiences and if they participated in the grant program. Of the respondents, 38 administrators selected at least one variable connecting them to the agricultural industry (e.g., grew up on a farm, worked in the Ag industry, former ag teacher themselves, etc.), while 62% ($f = 39$) indicated they had no background in the agricultural industry. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (r) was calculated to determine the relationship between their background and if their school district participated in the 3 Circles Grant program. A small, negative relationship (Cohen, 1990) was discovered between our two variables ($r = -.18$; $p = .09$) revealing that if an Illinois school administrator had no agriculture background, they were less likely to participate in the 3 Circles Grant program, but not at the significant $p < .05$ level.

Discussion, Implications, & Recommendations

Of administrators that offer the 3 Circles Grant, 74.2% stated they agreed or strongly agreed that the grant is a major factor in recruiting agriculture teacher applicants to their programs, and 80.9% agreed or strongly agreed that it is a major factor in retaining their current agriculture teachers. In light of the shortage of qualified SBAEs, it would appear that the 3 Circles Grant would be a useful tool for administrators to maintain their agriculture programs. Only 58.3% of administrators that do not offer the 3 Circles Grant stated they agree or strongly agree the grant would be a major factor in recruiting agriculture teacher applicants to their programs. More interestingly, only 43.5% of administrators that do not offer the 3 Circles Grant to their SBAE teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that the grant would be a major factor in retaining their current agriculture teacher. It is surprising that this second group of administrators is essentially stating that offering an extra three months of salary to prospective and current SBAEs would do nothing to improve recruitment and retention. Perhaps it is familiarization with the 3 Circles Grant that affects administrators' opinions of it? Because of this, it is recommended that more be done to educate and familiarize administrators of SBAE teachers about the benefits and availability of the 3 Circles Grant.

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